



USDA Forest Service

Key Messages

Date: July 30, 2013

Cave Management for White-Nose Syndrome

Background (2010 through July 2013)

White-nose syndrome (WNS) is a disease responsible for unprecedented bat mortality in eastern North America. Since it was discovered in 2006, millions of bats have died due to the disease, and the fungus that causes the disease, *Geomyces destructans* (Gd), has been confirmed as far west as Oklahoma. To date, neither the disease nor the fungus has been confirmed in Wyoming, Colorado, South Dakota, Nebraska, or Kansas.

In 2010 the Rocky Mountain Region issued a temporary Emergency Closure order, prohibiting human access to caves and abandoned mine lands (AMLs) on National Forest System lands in the Region. The order was extended during 2011 and 2012, and the current order expires July 31, 2013.

The Region recently facilitated an Environmental Assessment (EA) for 10 national forests in the Region. The Nebraska National Forest was not included in the EA because there are no known caves on the forest.

The purpose of the assessment was to analyze different approaches to reduce the potential for human introduction, spread, and impacts of Gd and WNS by providing management options for caves on national forests of the Rocky Mountain Region in Colorado, South Dakota, Wyoming and Kansas. An adaptive management approach was selected by all 10 national forests.

Implementation (beginning August 1, 2013)

The adaptive management strategy provides a consistent approach to White-nose syndrome management on national forests and grasslands in the Rocky Mountain Region. It includes required and optional management activities, providing each national forest the flexibility to address local needs in managing WNS.

The adaptive approach includes 3 tiers of management based on the status of WNS and Gd:

- Tier 1, *Prior to the arrival of WNS in the Region*: White-nose syndrome is not confirmed within 250 miles of a forest; caves are open with targeted closures for caves important to bats.
- Tier 2, *After the arrival of WNS in the Region*: White-nose syndrome confirmed within 250 miles; caves are generally closed
- Tier 3: WNS is endemic or has minimal impacts on bat populations; management reverts to Forest Plan direction

The majority of units included in the EA are currently under Tier 1 management. The Cimarron and Comanche National Grasslands are in Tier 2, based on proximity to the 2010 confirmation of Gd in Oklahoma.

Implementing Tier 1 of the adaptive management approach includes the following measures:

- 1) Closure of known cave hibernacula during the winter hibernation season (approximately October 15 – April 15, exact dates to be determined by each national forest).
- 2) Prohibition on the use of gear that has been used in caves or mines in states and Canadian provinces where White-nose syndrome or Gd has been confirmed.
- 3) Decontamination of gear and clothing for cave entries (not currently required on the San Juan National Forest).
- 4) Requiring online registration for cave access will increase White-nose syndrome awareness, better understand recreational cave-use patterns, and provides cavers the opportunity to file a post-trip report with information on cave resources and conditions.

A U.S. Forest Service website provides background on White-nose syndrome, details on the adaptive management approach, and information for cavers www.fs.usda.gov/r2.